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Critical Self-Theory and Veganism

wildling

PREFACE: A NOTE ON METHOD AND SCOPE

This article does not argue that critical self-theory leads to veganism, nor that veganism leads to critical self-theory. Neither is presented as the logical conclusion of the other. The most important thing this article is not: it is not an argument that critical self-theory, properly applied, leads to veganism—or that veganism, properly understood, leads to critical self-theory. Just want you to know what you're getting into. To argue either of those things would be to immediately betray the spirit of the project in question, which is precisely the refusal of any theory that makes demands on anyone.

What is explored here instead is something more modest, more precise, more interesting, and more honest: how critical self-theory—as developed by Jason McQuinn in his 2014 essay of the same name—functions as the operative mode of thought for someone who has already arrived at a vegan ethical position, and who holds that position from within an orientation that is anarchic, anti-realist, nihilist, egoist, and individualist. More specifically, this article is an exercise in application and extension, not advocacy. It asks a narrow question: how does this mode of thought function under those conditions? What happens when the two are brought into contact—how each illuminates the other, where their internal logics genuinely converge, and where they remain distinct?

What follows isn't a vegan manifesto, and it isn't an introduction to critical self-theory. It assumes familiarity with McQuinn's 2014 essay Critical Self-Theory: The Non-Ideological Critique of Ideology, and it assumes a reader who already understands veganism as something other than a dietary preference or a mainstream ethical cause—specifically as an anarchic ethical position held from within an anti-realist, nihilist, egoist, and individualist framework. Given those assumptions, the article has a single, narrow purpose: to work through McQuinn's terminology systematically and examine what each concept, in the order he develops it, has to say about veganism understood in this way—and what veganism, understood in this way, has to say back.

The terminology is McQuinn's throughout, and the treatment is systematic and terminological.

Each major concept he introduces—self-theory, pre-theory, recognition, reification, heteronomous theory, ideology, autonomy, immanent critique, slave theory, the first distinction, the reversal of perspective, critical self-theory—is taken in the order he introduces it, elaborated on its own terms, and traced through its implications for veganism as a lived, non-ideological practice. The article mirrors his argumentative movement from the most fundamental levels of experience outward into the social world and back again, applying each concept with the same extensiveness brought to domains such as wage labor, commodity consumption, and political ideology.

In certain moments, where the internal logic of one concept genuinely does open onto or illuminate a dimension of the other, that connection is made explicit and elaborated. The article does not artificially maintain separation where convergence occurs, but neither does it force connections where none arise. Where the internal logics genuinely converge, that convergence is named; where they remain distinct, the distinction stands. The body of the text that follows is unchanged in substance; what is presented here is a framing that serves as a door into the same room—a conceptual map drawn systematically along the coordinates McQuinn lays out, across the terrain of animal ethics as it is lived: not preached, not legislated, not universalized, but lived, from one's own unique, particular and irreducible perspective.

SELF-THEORY AND THE PRE-THEORETICAL ENCOUNTER WITH ANIMALS

Before there is any vegan philosophy, before any argument from animal sentience or ecological collapse, there is the self-theorizing body encountering other bodies.

Self-theory, as McQuinn develops it, is prior to any formed doctrine. It is the theoretical moment embedded in self-activity—in the ongoing practical navigation of one's world, thinking for oneself though not necessarily consciously or critically.

FURTHER READING

Vegan Amorality by Wildling

What Savages We Must Be by Flower Bomb

Critical Self-Theory by Jason McQuinn

Post-Left Anarchy by Jason McQuinn

The Unique and its Property by Max Stirner

Animal Liberation: Devastate to Liberate or Devastatingly Liberal?

pigs who learn their names and carry grudges and dream, sheep who recognize faces and grieve their dead, chickens who dustbathe in the afternoon sun and gossip in low murmuring clucks, geese who mate for life and mourn without apology. These beings are not symbols of a cause. They are not arguments. They are particular animals living particular lives, and they are available to your perception, in the living flesh, on a Saturday morning. Perhaps you will find that volunteering is one way to meet them—mud on your boots, a pig nosing at your hand, a goat measuring your character, a goose deciding with great seriousness, whether you can be trusted—and not to confirm a theory, not to feel virtuous, but to recover a way of seeing that civilization forced you to suppress; to remember what recognition felt like before habit trained you not to notice; and, beneath the accumulated sediment of concepts, to recover the encounter.

At the most fundamental level McQuinn identifies as pre-symbolic or pre-theoretical, self-theory consists of what he calls higher-level organismic functioning—the complex organization of perceptual-motor abilities through which we adapt to and live within our world. This pre-symbolic register is the bedrock upon which all symbolic theory rests. It is prior to language, prior to doctrine, prior to moral argument. And it is, critically, also the register in which animals primarily exist for us before we name, classify, or instrumentalize them. The child who recoils from the sight of a calf separated from his mother, or who refuses to eat an animal she has met and named, is operating at this pre-theoretical level. Something is encountered. Something is recognized. No utilitarian calculus precedes it. No deontological principle has been consulted. The encounter itself, the direct perceptual-motor engagement with a being whose autonomous agency registers on the body as real, produces a proto-ethical response that is not yet theory but is the soil from which any honest ethical position must eventually grow. The schema at the pre-symbolic level is: nonsymbolic-desire-or-problem therefore particular-practical-activity.

The animal is not yet a concept; it is an experience. The discomfort is not yet a moral claim; it is a sensation.

This matters enormously for how we understand veganism when held from a critical self-theory orientation. Because the dominant mode of vegan advocacy—like most ethical advocacy—has been to work in exactly the opposite direction: to begin from the symbolic, the theoretical, the moral argument, and attempt to push it back down into lived experience through persuasion, obligation, or guilt. Critical self-theory begins from the other end entirely. It honors the pre-theoretical encounter as the genuine foundation and treats symbolic theory as something built upon it, not something that replaces or overrides it.

For the egoist, anti-realist, nihilist, anarchist vegan in particular, this pre-theoretical foundation is significant. If there are no moral facts, if no value exists independently of valuers, if nothing is intrinsically good or bad, then the only honest ground for an ethical orientation toward animals is this: *one*

is moved. One finds that one cares. Not because one *ought* to, but because one does.

The pre-symbolic encounter with animal suffering, with animal liveliness, with animal particularity, registers as something that matters to this individual, in this life, from this perspective. That is the actual foundation. Everything else is elaboration.

THE ANATOMY OF SELF-THEORY: PERSPECTIVE, SENSATION, AND THE ANIMAL WORLD

Perspective, in the framework under examination, is not a limitation to be overcome.

Each person can experience the world from only one possible perspective—their own, shaped through inalienable, embodied sensation-and-movement-in-their-world. This irreducibility is the inescapable condition of all knowing and caring. There is no view from nowhere. There is no moral position that floats free of a positioned, embodied experiencer.

This has immediate implications for any ethical stance toward animals. The demand that one adopt a "universal" moral standpoint—one that accounts for all sentient beings equally, that weighs suffering on a cosmic scale, that generates obligations binding on everyone—is already, from a critical self-theory perspective, a departure from genuine self-theory into imagined perspective.

To claim that one must be vegan because suffering is objectively wrong, because animal interests possess intrinsic weight that generates universal duties, is to center one's ethical life not on one's own lived perspective but on an imagined, symbolic agent—in this case, the reified abstraction of Moral Truth, or Reason, or Sentience-as-such.

The individualist-anarchist vegan is not indifferent to the suffering of animals. Quite the opposite.

invisible slavery on which modern civilization rests. And that one can, in one's own life, on one's own terms, refuse to participate in that reproduction.

This refusal is not salvation. It is not revolution. It is not the fulfillment of a moral law. It is the lived expression of an owned perspective—the particular, non-ideological, self-creating activity of someone who has recognized something and refused to look away from it. Critical self-theory does not make that recognition more true or more binding. It simply provides a way of thinking about what one is doing that does not betray it by translating it into yet another heteronomous ideology.

The recognition was always there, prior to any theory. The theory is its instrument, not its authority.

PRIOR TO ANY THEORY

What precedes this text is ancient. The recognition that grounds the argument—the pre-theoretical encounter with a being whose agency presses itself on perception before any concept arrives to organize it—was there before the first sentence was written, and it will be there after the last one is read. The theoretical apparatus erected here is a map of something that existed before the map, and the map is not the territory. Somewhere, right now, a pig is exploring her environment with the same curiosity she would have brought to it ten thousand years ago, before the Neolithic institutions that reduced her to a unit of production had been invented. She is not waiting for a theory of her liberation. She is not a concept. She is someone to herself. She is a living center of her own world, as you are of yours. She encounters the world from within her own life, just as you encounter yours from within your own. The encounter with her—direct, pre-symbolic, prior to every doctrine and every argument—is where this inquiry begins and where it must always return, because arguments are only instruments. Recognition comes first. Theory follows after.

Across North America, hundreds of farm animal sanctuaries shelter individuals who survived civilization's violence, and others fortunate enough never to have known the industries that would have consumed their lives—

sense, recovering a capacity for recognition that the institutional development of civilization has progressively suppressed.

CONCLUSION: LIVING WITHOUT IDEOLOGICAL MEDIATION

Veganism, held within a critical self-theory orientation and from within an anarchic, nihilist, egoist, anti-realist framework, is a feature of one's own life—chosen and owned, grounded in the pre-symbolic recognition of animal agency and the lived refusal to sustain the institutional suppression of that recognition. It is not a doctrine, not a movement, not an identity, not a moral obligation, not a lifestyle brand. It is the practical expression, in the domain of one's relationship with other animals, of the same refusal of self-alienation and heteronomous submission that critical self-theory enacts across all domains.

The concluding formulation of critical self-theory in McQuinn's essay is this: most basically, using critical self-theory means the refusal to ever mistake one's reflections—one's conceptions or representations—for one's own lived-activity or lived-experience. It is to accept that one is fully self-creating, fully responsible for oneself, and that one requires no mediators in order to live one's own life—no figure or person or thing to hide behind, understanding that one is one's whole world and one's whole world is one's own self to the extent of all one's powers.

Veganism understood in this way does not universalize itself. It does not demand that others follow.

It does not claim that its basis in first-person recognition constitutes a moral proof. It acknowledges that other people, from their own first-person perspectives, will make different choices, and it does not pretend to have access to a moral standpoint from which those choices can be condemned as objectively wrong. What it does insist on is this: that the dominant culture's treatment of animals is not natural, not inevitable, and not honest—that it depends on a sustained and institutionally enforced suppression of recognition, a systematic practice of reification, a daily reproduction of the

But the basis for caring is not the imagined tribunal of Universal Reason. It is the first-person encounter, the lived recognition of other beings as beings, the fact that one's own world includes these others and that their condition affects the texture of one's own experience of that world.

Self-theory has no goal of its own outside of how we each choose to use it or not—it makes no demands on us, religious, metaphysical, moral or ideological. Veganism, held in this mode, makes no universal demand either. It is chosen. It is owned. It is a feature of this life, not an obligation imposed on all lives by the nature of things.

The schematic anatomy of complex symbolic self-theory is: complex-nonsymbolic+symbolic-desire-or-problem therefore practical-activity-including-symbolic-activity. For the vegan who thinks and writes and speaks about animal ethics, this means: one begins from the embodied, preconceptual fact of caring about animals, and one then builds symbolic frameworks—arguments, analyses, critiques—that help one navigate the world in a manner consistent with that caring. The symbolic elaboration serves the pre-symbolic life. It does not replace it, override it, or claim authority over it.

THEORY AND LANGUAGE: VEGANISM WITHOUT A FIXED DOCTRINE

The language of animal ethics is not a neutral instrument. It comes loaded with prior uses, with institutional histories, with the sediment of ideological projects that have used it for purposes quite different from any given individual's own. And the framework for understanding why requires first grasping what language actually is.

What we actually find, when examined carefully, is a collection of linguistic practices engaged in by relatively independent human beings in varying relationships to each other. There is no complete system of any language locatable in any one place. Language is not something created already complete and given to us by reified entities—it is something each person re-creates for themselves in interaction, just as children develop their own

linguistic abilities by recreating language systems comparable and compatible with the language-uses to which they are exposed.

The vocabulary of animal ethics—sentience, suffering, rights, exploitation, veganism itself—arrives bearing this history. The mainstream animal rights tradition, for instance, has largely worked within a rationalist, universalist framework borrowed from liberal moral philosophy—one that reifies concepts like "rights" and "persons" and "interests" in ways that smuggle in heteronomous moral authority while appearing merely descriptive.

The critical self-theorist who is also a vegan uses this language instrumentally, appropriating what is useful and reinterpreting what serves their own perspective, without ever surrendering to the pretense that the concepts are anything other than self-constructed tools. One can speak of animal suffering without believing in objective moral facts. One can describe factory farming as a practice that one finds intolerable without claiming that it violates some cosmic moral law. The language is employed practically, in the service of one's own understanding and one's own life, and it is always understood to be exactly that—a set of techniques for communicating and navigating, not a revelation of pre-existing truth. or a moral law somehow inscribed upon the fabric of reality.

(Here, the contrast is with "objective moral facts," and with moral language treated as a kind of shorthand we use to communicate and interpret, rather than as a revelation of moral reality; see error theory, moral fictionalism, and moral anti-realism for related positions. Ordinary language has been shaped over thousands of years by moral inscription; this makes it hard—maybe even impossible—to speak in a fully non-moral way in practice. Even when someone deliberately avoids overt moral terms, morality tends to creep back in through implication and convention, because other people interpret and reframe what is said in ways that reintroduce it—through lazy binaries like "good/bad (or evil)," "right/wrong," "moral/immoral," and "just/unjust." So the nihilist or anti-realist position isn't really an escape from moral language so much as a constant conflict with it. That means staying attentive not just to phrasing, but to how one's own thinking runs internally, and how it gets reshaped when expressed and in contact with others and their interpretations.)

recognition. "Hunter-gatherers" who depended for their lives on intimate knowledge of animal behavior, who tracked individual animals over days and landscapes, who developed elaborate symbolic systems for understanding and relating to the animal world, were not people for whom animals were simply objects. Their relationships with animals involved real recognition of animal agency, animal desire, animal particularity. The spiritual and ritual frameworks through which they interpreted these relationships were, as McQuinn notes, initially forms of animism—imaginative extensions of recognition to the animal world—rather than fixed religious ideologies.

This history can be read, from within a vegan critical self-theory perspective, as also a history of the suppression of the recognition of animal agency, and of the conditions under which that suppression might be undone. McQuinn's sidebar "A Brief History of Theory" offers a first-person account of how theory emerges from lived experience, from pre-symbolic interaction with the world, from the slow development of symbolic communication and eventually ideological formation.

It is with the Neolithic transition—with the development of animal domestication, the sedentary accumulation of surplus, the hierarchical chiefdom, and eventually the state—that both human and animal slavery are institutionalized, and with them the ideological formations that render both invisible. The domestication of animals is not simply an economic development. It is also a conceptual one: the first large-scale practice of the reification of animal agency, the institutional reduction of beings with autonomous perspectives to productive units owned and directed by humans. From this point, the slave theories that legitimate animal exploitation develop alongside the slave theories that legitimate human exploitation, each reinforcing the other.

The individual who, in the present, recovers the capacity for genuine recognition of animal agency, who refuses to sustain in their own life the habitual suppression of recognition that the institutions of animal agriculture require, is, in this historical perspective, refusing a very old and very total form of reification. She is not implementing a new moral theory. She is, in a

theory. It is not a conclusion of an argument. It is the starting point—the pre-theoretical ground from which her symbolic elaborations about animals, about institutions, about food and clothing and research, grow.

This does not make her veganism less serious or less committed. If anything, it makes it more so.

The vegan who practices out of ideological obligation—who follows the doctrine because it is correct, who maintains consistency because consistency is morally required—is always vulnerable to the disillusionment that follows doctrinal challenges, to the resentment that follows from sacrificing one's desires to an external authority, to the recuperation that follows when the ideology is absorbed by institutions. The vegan who practices from genuine self-theory—from owned recognition of what one cares about and what one cannot in good conscience support—is not vulnerable to these failures in the same way, because there is no doctrine to be challenged, no external authority to resent, no ideological identity to be recuperated.

Critical self-theory makes no pretense to a perfect rationality according to any external measure. It is what it is and needs to be nothing more nor less. It proposes no particular ontological, epistemological, axiological, or political-economic theories. It is merely the refusal of every possible form of self-alienation in the conception and practice of any of these theories. For the vegan, this means: one need not claim that animal liberation will produce the best consequences for all sentient beings (utilitarian), or that animals possess rights that generate categorical obligations (deontological), or that speciesism is structurally analogous to racism and sexism and therefore equally impermissible (identity-political). One need only refuse the self-alienation involved in suppressing one's own recognition—in practicing the daily denial of what one has recognized as real.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VEGAN SELF-THEORY: FROM PRE-SYMBOLIC ENCOUNTER TO CONSCIOUS REFUSAL

Before the development of agriculture, human relationships with animals were complex, varied, and in many respects characterized by genuine

RECOGNITION AND REIFICATION: SEEING THE ANIMAL AND MAKING IT A PRODUCT

Start with what recognition actually looks like when directed at an animal. The cow who seeks out the company of her preferred companions; the chicken who seeks shade and dust-baths and social company; the turkey who recognizes familiar individuals and responds differently to strangers; the sheep who becomes distressed when separated from those she knows; the pig who explores her environment with as much curiosity as any dog or cat; the crow who remembers human faces and adjusts his behavior accordingly; the rat who hesitates when another rat is in distress or changes course based on prior experience; the fish who schools, avoids threats, and navigates complex environmental cues; the octopus who explores, manipulates objects, and changes behavior in response to novelty; the deer who freezes at a sound in the brush and then bolts at the slightest sign of danger; the horse who flinches at the raised whip—all of these register, at the level of pre-theoretical encounter, as beings who act, who prefer, who resist, who pursue, who remember, who anticipate, who learn, who adapt. They are beings for whom things and experiences matter. Their agency is not identical to human agency, but it is agency. And it is not inferior because it is not exactly the same. Agency varies between humans as well. Human agency already varies enormously across age, ability, temperament, knowledge, circumstance, and cognition. We don't typically conclude that agency ceases to be agency whenever it differs from some idealized norm. The same logic applies to nonhuman animals.

Recognition, as McQuinn develops the concept, is the self-creative process through which we discover our worlds—and especially ourselves and other beings as autonomous agents in our worlds. It describes the dialogic process of understanding undergone in each of our encounters, in which we learn the extent of our own powers and the powers of objects, including the extent of their ability to act intentionally. Recognition of animate, living objects—beings distinguished from the relatively inanimate world by some degree of autonomous agency—is part of the fundamental texture of lived experience. Recognition of animal agency does not require a moral philosophy. It requires only that one not have been systematically trained to suppress it.

Reification is the opposite movement: the interactive process through which we can reduce our full experience of recognition in some way, making it more abstract or passive, less intense or direct, interpreting it as less real by rationalizing—conceptually fixing or hypostatizing—one or more aspects of the experience. Reification necessarily involves two correlated moments: a reductive moment (an activity is reduced to a passive object) and an animative moment (the activity removed from the passively constructed object is projected onto a symbolic agent). The two archetypal models of reification in practice are slavery and religion: slaves and spirits.

The entire infrastructure of animal agriculture, animal experimentation, and the commodification of animal bodies is a masterwork of institutionalized reification in this sense. Consider the broiler chicken. The living bird—curious, responsive, capable of recognizing individual faces, capable of REM sleep and therefore of dreaming—is reduced, through the institutional practice of the poultry industry, to a unit of production. Her autonomous agency is negated in the reductive moment: she is a breast weight, a feed conversion ratio, a unit in a supply chain. The agency that is thereby removed from her is then projected, in the animative moment, onto symbolic agents: the corporation, the market, "consumer demand," the regulatory framework that licenses the activity.
No individual person kills: the industry kills. No individual person is responsible: the system is. The chicken's life-activity has been appropriated and transferred to institutional abstractions, exactly as McQuinn describes.

Reification can be employed consciously or not, and as long as it is deployed with awareness of its limitations as a truncated form of recognition, it can allow people to take certain behaviors largely for granted. However, when it becomes habitual—through repeated compulsory-submissive behavior, and no longer consciously purposeful—reified forms of recognition can be mistaken for fully attentive recognition. This is the precise mechanism by which most people in industrial civilization relate to the animals they consume. The reification has become so complete, so habituated, so institutionally reinforced, that the original living animal has entirely disappeared from the consumer's perceptual field. The package of meat in the solution"—critical self-theory warns against the substitution of brand identity for genuine autonomy. When a vegan ideologue demands doctrinal purity —"you're not really vegan if you sometimes eat honey"—critical self-theory refuses the submission to an external moral authority masquerading as consistency. When the broader culture reassures that the suffering involved in animal agriculture is unavoidable, necessary, and natural—critical self-theory recognizes this bullshit as the reification it is, the institutional manufacture of the invisibility of modern slavery.

CRITICAL SELF-THEORY AS CONSCIOUSLY EMPLOYED SELF-THEORY: THE VEGAN EGOIST'S PERSPECTIVE

The vegan egoist holds her veganism not as a doctrine but as an expression of her own perspective—as something she owns in the fullest sense, something she chose and continues to choose on her own terms, for her own reasons, in her own manner. This is the core of what veganism means from within a critical self-theory orientation, and it is worth holding plainly before working through its implications.

Consciously employed self-theory, as McQuinn characterizes it, involves a systematically self-critical attitude towards all of the tools one uses to conceptualize, communicate, analyze, and intervene in one's world. It does not stop short from refusing submission to every heteronomous power or dogmatic principle. It is one's own theoretical grasping of one's own life. When consistent and complete, it leaves no room for any self-alienating theory—no religion, no ideology, no fixed reifications of life experience at all.

The vegan egoist is not a vegan because Singer or Regan or Francione or any other moral theorist has correctly derived the obligations that her nature as a rational agent or as a sentient being entails. She is a vegan because, from within her own irreducible perspective, she finds that she cares about animals —that she finds their suffering intolerable to participate in, that she values their autonomous agency, that she experiences the institutional reduction of their lives to commodities as a form of violence she is unwilling to reproduce in her own life-activities. This caring is hers. It is not borrowed from a moral

context of consciously resisting any heteronomous-theory-demands-to-submit-to-various-claims-of-higher-priority-more-real-entities. The resulting practical activity both satisfies the desire or solves the problem and fends off all attempts at dividing oneself against oneself, refusing any collaboration with enslaving institutions to the best of one's powers.

One encounters food, clothing, products—the material infrastructure of daily life—with an awareness that these goods are embedded in institutional systems that depend on the reification and exploitation of animal life. One's desire is to live as consistently as possible with one's own recognition of animal agency—not because a moral law demands this, not because an ideology prescribes it, but because one finds that one cannot in good conscience participate in the institutional suppression of what one recognizes as real. The practical activity that follows—choosing foods, navigating social situations, making purchasing decisions—is guided by this orientation without being determined by a fixed doctrine. It is pragmatic, contextual, negotiated with the actual possibilities available in one's situation.

The aspiration to live without participating in animal exploitation is realized partially, imperfectly, in a world whose infrastructure is built on that exploitation. Grains grown with pesticides kill field animals. Transportation to work involves fossil fuels whose extraction destroys habitat. No practice is pure. The critical self-theorist who is also a vegan does not pretend otherwise and is not bound to an ideological standard of purity that would make every imperfection a moral failure. The practice is navigated practically, with whatever degree of consistency one's circumstances permit, with an awareness of the institutional constraints that make complete consistency impossible, without self-flagellation and without ideological policing of others.

Critical self-theory is, in McQuinn's formulation, an early-warning and self-defense system. For the vegan navigating a world saturated with the language of food culture, the aesthetics of meat-eating, the social rituals of shared meals, the advertising of the food industry, and the ideological pressure of various vegan movements, this early-warning function is constantly active. When a corporate vegan brand invites identification—"join us, be part of the supermarket is encountered not as the reduced and reified body of a once-living creature who had autonomous agency, but simply as a food product—a commodity—with a price and a set of nutritional values. The violence that produced it is not hidden so much as it has been conceptually dissolved.

For the vegan operating from a critical self-theory perspective, this analysis is not primarily a moral indictment of other people—it is a description of a structural feature of the social world in which one lives, a feature produced and maintained by the institutions of what McQuinn calls modern slavery and their attendant reifications. The vegan's refusal to participate in this system of reification is not first and foremost an act of moral protest. It is, more basically, a refusal to sustain in one's own life the habitual suppression of recognition—a refusal to practice the daily denial of animal agency that the institutions of animal agriculture require of their participants.

McQuinn's two examples of reification— wage work and commodity consumption —are directly relevant here. Commodity consumption, he writes, requires that people largely reduce their life-activities to the required roles of largely passive "consumers" within respective modes of rationing, making a gift of their self-alienated agency to the organizers and enforcers of their respective rationing institutions. The consumption of animal products is a paradigm case: the consumer participates in an institutional arrangement through which her own capacity for recognition—her capacity to see the animal as a being—is systematically suppressed in order to maintain the smooth functioning of a system of forced labor imposed on billions of nonhuman animals annually. To participate unthinkingly in this consumption is, in McQuinn's terms, to refuse ever to become conscious of one's own self-alienated participation in the constitution and reproduction of these reified systems.

HETERONOMOUS THEORY AND IDEOLOGY: THE ANIMAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AS IDEOLOGY

This analysis cuts against not only the dominant culture's treatment of animals but also against the mainstream animal rights and animal liberation movements. These movements, in their dominant forms, have constructed ideological systems in the precise sense McQuinn describes: fixed doctrines, reified abstractions, demands for submission to heteronomous moral authority.

Heteronomous theory is McQuinn's term for thinking for oneself through submission to theories centered somewhere else besides one's own life—through the self-alienation of one's perspective.

Heteronomous theory is another name for ideological theory, in the most generally critical sense.

Ideology functions to symbolically formulate the transubstantiation of life—the self-alienation and appropriation of agency—in relatively fixed dogmas.

Peter Singer's utilitarianism, Tom Regan's rights theory, the abolitionist veganism of Gary Francione, the bland moralizing of Leslie Cross—each of these constitutes a heteronomous critical theory in McQuinn's framework.

Each critiques particular forms of animal exploitation in order to substitute a particular moral framework to which individuals are required to submit. The individual who cares about animals is not invited to develop and deploy her own self-theory; she is invited to adopt the correct moral position as determined by the theory.

The function of every ideology—from religions to liberalism, from nationalisms to Marxism or libertarianism—is to symbolically formulate the transubstantiation of life in relatively fixed dogmas that sugarcoat the required submissive and self-reductive moments. The animal rights ideology functions similarly: it takes the living, particular, first-person encounter with animal suffering and translates it into a fixed doctrine (animal rights / sentience / speciesism as moral category) that then claims authority over all individuals regardless of their lived perspectives. One is not asked whether one reduces the fullness of one's recognition of animal agency and constitutes animals as objects legitimately available for use.

Once this first distinction is made and its self-created nature disavowed, all the slave theories of the human-animal relationship follow necessarily. If animals are simply and naturally objects, then the question is not whether to use them but how. The entire apparatus of animal welfare law, veterinary science in its regulatory function, and "humane" farming discourse follows from the refusal to recognize the first distinction as a first distinction—as something made, not given. From within this disavowal, the only questions that can be asked are technical: how much space does a laying hen require to meet the welfare standard? How many hours or days should a calf be taken from his mother? What stunning method most reliably renders pigs insensible before slaughter? What method of slaughtering is to be employed? Or whatever-the-fuck-else. These questions take for granted the legitimacy of the institutional reduction of animal agency that the first distinction makes possible.

Applying critical self-theory to this domain means, first, becoming conscious of having made this distinction—recognizing that the division between morally relevant and morally irrelevant beings is not a discovery but a choice, institutionally enforced and individually reproduced. The simple solution McQuinn offers for abolishing human conceptual alienation is to consciously stop alienating one's own conceptual activity. For the vegan who thinks in these terms, this means refusing to disavow the first distinction—refusing to pretend that the reduction of animals to objects of use is anything other than a continuous active choice, one that can be unmade, one that is being unmade in every moment that one refuses to participate in the institutions that depend on it.

THE ANATOMY OF CRITICAL SELF-THEORY: VEGANISM AS NON-IDEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

What does non-ideological veganism actually look like in its daily functioning? The schematic anatomy of critical self-theory offers a way to answer this: complex-nonsymbolic+symbolic-desire-or-problem within the

ordered and ranked. Applied to the question of animals, this means refusing the anthropocentric fantasy that the human perspective is the natural center around which all value and meaning are organized—not by replacing it with an animal-centered or sentience-centered fantasy, but by recognizing that there is no center, only perspectives, each irreducible to any other.

The egoist dimension of this reversal is important. The individualist-anarchist vegan does not pretend to adopt the animal's perspective—that would be another imagined perspective, another departure from genuine self-theory. One remains within one's own perspective. But from within that perspective, one recognizes the animal as a being who also has its own perspective—who is also a center, for itself, of its own world. This recognition does not generate moral obligations in any universal sense. It generates, in the individual who achieves it and refuses to suppress it, the lived experience of caring —of finding that one cannot participate in the institutional denial of what one recognizes as real.

THE FIRST DISTINCTION: SELF-ALIENATION AND THE SPECIESIST DIVIDE

Every ideology begins with a hidden act—a self-division of experience that one then refuses and disavows any responsibility for having made. This hidden, self-alienating first distinction becomes the logical basis for all the slave theories that follow. Within any ideological form of thinking, it is the continuous and consistent premise necessary to conceive of oneself as a slave rather than identifying with one's own self-creating activity in one's own world.

In the context of animal ethics, the first distinction is the arbitrary division drawn between human and animal—or, more precisely, between beings who count morally and beings who do not. This division is presented, in both its religious and philosophical forms, as a natural feature of the moral landscape, as something discovered rather than made. But it is a conceptual self-division that one makes but refuses responsibility for making. The drawing of this line is an act—an ongoing, daily, institutionally reinforced act—through which one recognizes this particular animal as a being; one is told that all animals of sufficient neural complexity are rights-bearers, and that speciesism—the unjustified differential treatment of beings on the basis of species membership—is a moral error analogous to racism or sexism.

The critical self-theorist need not reject every insight developed within animal ethics discourse. Many of its descriptive and analytical claims are compelling. Speciesism, for example, is not merely analogous to racism or sexism but deeply entangled with them historically and structurally. Recognizing that entanglement does not require grounding it in a moral theory.

One can, using critical self-theory, appropriate what is useful from any tradition of thought while destroying its heteronomous, dogmatic elements. Singer's descriptive account of animal suffering is useful. Regan's analysis of factory farming is illuminating. Francione's critique of welfare reform as recuperation is, in many respects, astute. But none of these thinkers' moral frameworks need be adopted as a binding ideology. They can be stripped of their reified moral universalism and their useful descriptive and analytical elements appropriated for one's own perspective, on one's own terms.

The suppression of genuine self-understanding is visible in the mainstream vegan movement in the constant demand for ideological conformity—for consistency, for adherence to the correct line on welfare reform, on intersectionality, on abolitionism versus incrementalism. The movement's tendency to police its own members for ideological deviation reproduces, at a smaller scale, the dynamics of every other ideological formation McQuinn describes.

THE ANATOMY OF HETERONOMOUS THEORY: HOW ANIMAL EXPLOITATION WEARS THE FACE OF NECESSITY

Ask someone why they eat meat and watch what happens. The question produces something like existential vertigo in many people—not because they have a considered answer, but because it challenges a reification so

habituated that it has become invisible. This is the anatomy of heteronomous theory operating in practice.

The anatomy McQuinn describes is a schematic in which one's practical activity is constrained by submission to a higher-priority, more-real entity—whether god, market, law, or species-being—such that the limits dictated by the fetishized entity circumscribe all practical activity and all thought.

The key feature is that once one has personally and existentially identified with the fetishized conceptual entity, factors outside of belief in it cannot be considered without generating high levels of discomfort and anxiety.

The ideology of human exceptionalism is some deeply entrenched fuckery: the view that humans occupy a categorically distinct moral position from all other animals, that their interests are intrinsically weightier, that their use of other animals for food, fiber, labor, entertainment, and experimentation is self-evidently legitimate. It functions in exactly this way.

For most participants in the institutions of animal agriculture and related industries, this ideology operates implicitly—not as a consciously held doctrine, but as the unexamined structure within which all thought about food, about animals, about one's relationship to the living world, takes place.

In the context of animal exploitation, the image McQuinn reaches for is remarkably literal: believers in ideologies have placed rings in their own noses, and have announced that they want to be led by those who have claimed the proper ideological authority to represent their self-alienated agency.

The institutional frameworks that govern the treatment of animals—regulatory bodies, veterinary science in its applied commercial form, the agricultural extension system, the food industry—all claim to represent the proper authority over questions of animal welfare, food safety, and the legitimate uses of animal bodies. Individuals who submit to these frameworks have, in the most concrete sense, surrendered their own capacity to find that one cares about that. The recognition is direct. The caring is one's own.

THE REVERSAL OF PERSPECTIVE: FROM SPECIES-BEING TO LIVED ENCOUNTER

To see an animal as livestock, as a lab subject, as a pest species, as a food animal, is not to describe it— it is to have already performed a conceptual operation on it. The category precedes the encounter and shapes what can be seen. What the reversal of perspective enacts is a refusal of that prior operation, a return to the encounter itself.

The reversal McQuinn describes is a return from the inside-out, heteronomously constructed world to its one and only actually-lived perspective: my perspective for me, your perspective for you.

Instead of working against ourselves in attempts to see and understand the world through the eyes of slave masters—through God's, Reason's, Society's perspective—critical self-theory involves a complete and permanent reversal through which we consistently refuse to believe that we are primarily the objects of others rather than self-creators responsible for our own lives, choices, and actions.

Applied to one's relationship with animals, this means refusing to see them primarily as the objects of institutional systems and instead recovering the capacity for direct recognition of them as beings: as particular, individual creatures with their own perspectives, their own desires, their own modes of self-activity. This is not the replacement of one categorical system by another (from "food animal" to "rights-bearer," say). It is the dissolution of the categorical suppression of recognition itself.

The comparison to Kant's "Copernican turn" is instructive here. That turn was more radical than what preceded it, but it still substituted one imagined center (the Earth, transcendental subjectivity) for another (the Sun, empirical subjectivity). The critical self-theory reversal refuses any absolute center—any point outside one's own lived perspective from which the world can be

philosophy defined as the pursuit of absolute Ground or Truth, and every form of ideology in which theory is constructed around an imagined subjectivity intended to displace anyone's actually-lived self-theory.

The great monotheistic traditions have largely constructed the human-animal relationship as one of divine sanction: God gave humanity dominion over the animals, and the moral order of creation places animals beneath humans as objects of legitimate use. This is slave theory in the strictest sense—a fetishized conceptual entity (God, divine order, creation) is posited as the real agent whose will determines the legitimate use of animal bodies, and human beings are constituted as the privileged recipients of this divine grant, with animals as the gift. The animal's autonomous agency is not recognized; it is theologically suppressed by the prior determination that animals exist for human purposes.

Secular philosophy has produced its own forms of slave theory in relation to animals. The Kantian tradition holds that only rational agents—beings capable of autonomous moral self-legislation—can be ends-in-themselves, direct objects of moral concern. Animals, lacking this capacity for rational autonomy in the Kantian sense, are merely means, objects of legitimate use as long as their abuse does not corrupt human moral character. Fuck that. This is precisely the structure of slave theory: a fetishized abstraction (Reason, rational agency) is posited as the criterion of moral relevance, and beings that do not meet this criterion are effectively excluded from the moral community. The animal's actually-experienced suffering, its actually-exercised agency, is overridden by the prior determination of the philosopher's abstract category.

The nihilist, egoist, anti-realist orientation of the individualist-anarchist vegan is, among other things, a refusal of all such slave theories. Not because a different, better moral theory replaces them, but because the entire project of grounding one's treatment of others in a fetishized abstraction—Reason, God, Natural Law, Sentience-as-such—is recognized as the ideological operation it is. One does not need God's permission or Kant's categorical imperative or Singer's felicific calculus to recognize a being who suffers and for recognition of animal agency to institutional structures that exist to maintain and legitimate the exploitation of animals.

PRIMITIVE, ANCIENT, AND MODERN SLAVERY: ANIMALS AND THE HIDDEN CONTINUITY OF DOMINATION

No civilization has ever existed without an extensive foundation built on dispossession, forced labor, and plunder—and none has rested that foundation on human bodies alone. The domination of nonhuman animals is perhaps the oldest and most extensive form of institutionalized slavery, and it is worth extending McQuinn's analysis of modern slavery to cover it explicitly, since he does not.

McQuinn argues that the institutions of modern slavery—wage labor, commodity consumption, debt, prison—are continuous with, and more total in their reach than, the older forms of institutionalized slavery that civilization has always rested on. What he does not extend this analysis to is the domination of nonhuman animals, which the domestication of animals—briefly acknowledged as part of the Neolithic transition that also produced the earliest forms of human slavery—preceded and arguably made possible. The logic is continuous: the reduction of beings to passive objects whose agency is appropriated and whose life-activities are directed by others for those others' benefit. What is a pig in an industrial confinement operation, if not a slave in the structural sense already established? Her movement is controlled, her reproductive activity commandeered; her offspring are separated from her, her body modified to suit the productive requirements of the system, and she is killed when she can no longer generate profit at the required rate. The reifications that make this possible are structurally identical to those that make human wage-slavery possible, though they are more complete, more violent, and more total in their suppression of the enslaved being's autonomous agency.

The critical self-theorist who is also a vegan does not need to frame this parallel as a moral argument —"animals are enslaved just like humans, therefore exploiting them is wrong"—which would be to slip back into ideological mode, arguing from a moral universal. The observation is more

basic: the same structural mechanisms of reification, the same appropriation of agency, the same institutional maintenance of invisible domination, that McQuinn identifies as the foundation of modern civilization are operative in the treatment of animals, and have been operative for longer and on a greater scale. One who has developed the capacity for critical recognition of reification and self-alienation in one domain will find that the same analytical capacities illuminate the treatment of animals with uncomfortable precision.

The enclosures of commons that dispossessed human communities of their self-sufficient life-ways also eliminated the commons within which people had foraged, hunted, and lived alongside animals in relationships that, while not free of domination, were nothing like the total institutional control of the modern factory farm. The industrialization of animal agriculture is continuous with the broader industrialization of human labor—both are expressions of the same drive toward the total institutional management of living activity in service of capital accumulation.

ENGENDERED RESISTANCE TO SLAVERY: VEGANISM AS A PRACTICE OF REFUSAL FROM WITHIN

Resistance, as the structures of slavery have tightened around every aspect of human life, has had to come increasingly from within—since that is where most surviving humans now find themselves trapped. Earlier stages permitted open refusal through warfare, mutinies, insurrections, evasion and escape. The dominant forms now are necessarily interior to the systems they resist.

Veganism, understood as an anarchic practice rather than a moral ideology, is precisely a form of resistance from within. One does not erase the institutions of animal agriculture by refusing to purchase their products—the system is too large, too embedded, too politically protected for individual consumer choices to threaten its existence. But one does refuse, in one's own life, to participate in the daily reproduction of those institutions through one's own consumption. This refusal is not a strategy for systemic change, at least not in any direct sense. It is something more basic: a refusal to allow one's own life-activities to be directed by the reifications that sustain the system. It is the

Foucault's genealogical work, with its focus on regimes of practice and the historical constitution of subjects, offers tools for analyzing how the category of "livestock" or "food animal" has been constituted through specific institutional practices, legal frameworks, and scientific discourses—and this is genuinely illuminating. But it also, in McQuinn's terms, leaves at most a tiny bit of wiggle room for the possibilities of personal power as resistance to power, while remaining committed to the philosophical-ideological project and unable to follow its own logic to the point of affirming the particular, non-reified, autonomous perspective of any actually-living being—human or animal.

The anarchist vegan can appropriate whatever is analytically useful from both of these traditions without adopting either as a framework. The deconstructive destabilization of the category of "the animal" is useful for exposing the arbitrariness and violence of the conceptual operations that reduce the rich diversity of nonhuman life to a single undifferentiated mass available for human use.

The genealogical tracing of how "livestock" became a legal and economic category can illuminate the historical contingency of arrangements that present themselves as natural and inevitable. But these critical tools are used instrumentally, in the service of one's own perspective and one's own refusal of reification, not as foundations for a new theory of animal liberation.

SLAVE THEORY AND THE ANIMAL: RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE LEGITIMIZATION OF EXPLOITATION

Slave theory's function is to displace lived autonomy by attributing it to some abstract imagined subjectivity—and the religious and philosophical legitimation of animal exploitation is a particularly clear instance of exactly this.

The term itself is McQuinn's name for heteronomous theories considered through the lens of their underlying social-institutional function. It includes every religion that claims transcendent spirits or planes of existence, all

MARXIST AND POST-STRUCTURALIST CRITICAL THEORIES: THEIR FAILURES IN RELATION TO ANIMAL ETHICS

Classical Marxism has been largely indifferent to the question of animal exploitation, and the reasons are structural. The framework focuses on the category of labor—a category that has traditionally been confined to human beings, whose capacity for conscious, purposive transformation of nature is taken as definitional of the human species. Animals don't fit neatly into the categories of class, labor, and capital as human workers do, even though their exploitation is structurally analogous and economically integrated into the same capitalist system.

McQuinn's extended critique of Marxist social theory as a form of heteronomous critical theory illuminates precisely why this gap exists. Socialist and eco-socialist traditions have made some attempts to address animal exploitation, but these tend to reproduce the heteronomous character of Marxist theory: animal liberation is assimilated into a grand historical narrative of emancipation that requires, once again, the individual's submission to collective ideological formations—the party, the class, the movement. What is suppressed — in precisely the pattern traced above in relation to human autonomy within Marxism—is the actually-lived, particular, first-person encounter with animal agency and animal suffering, which cannot be adequately theorized within categories designed for the analysis of human social relations.

Post-structuralist critical theory offers a more interesting, though ultimately still limited, engagement with animal ethics. Derrida's late work on the question of the animal—particularly "The Animal That Therefore I Am"—enacts exactly the deconstructive move McQuinn analyzes: it relentlessly critiques the structures through which Western philosophy has constituted "the animal" as a fixed category, a homogeneous mass of beings defined entirely by their lacking relative to the human. But it remains, as McQuinn would predict, trapped within the reified linguistic realm from which deconstruction cannot exit. Derrida can destabilize the category of "the animal" without resolution, without a way forward that does not itself presuppose new conceptual structures.

practice of not allowing one's own recognition of animal agency to be suppressed through habituated participation in its institutional denial.

Even when enslaved people do their best to submit to enslavement and hide their suffering, there are always expressions—feelings and thoughts and acts of engendered resistance. The same is true of animals in confinement, who exhibit what behavioral scientists have come to call "stereotypies"—repetitive, apparently purposeless behaviors like bar-biting, weaving, and pacing that are widely understood to be expressions of the frustration of natural behavioral repertoires, of thwarted autonomous agency. These are the body's refusals, the organism's resistance to the reduction of its life to the requirements of the institution. The vegan who notices these behaviors and refuses to fund the institutions that produce them is responding to recognition —to the direct evidence of suppressed animal agency—rather than to ideological demand.

CRITICAL THEORY: IMMANENT CRITIQUE AND THE VEGAN POSITION

Immanent critique—critique from within rather than from outside, critique that takes its objects' own terms and logic seriously rather than appealing to a claimed superior standpoint—is the core method of all modern critical theories, and it is also the only form of argument about animals worth taking seriously from a critical self-theory orientation. The development McQuinn traces runs from Protestant reformers who read the Bible for themselves rather than accepting Rome's authoritative interpretation, through Enlightenment philosophy, to its most radical formulation in Stirner's dissolution of every fixed abstraction. What all of these share is the refusal to argue from a transcendent standpoint—a refusal to say "according to the law that stands above all of us, you are wrong." For veganism as a critical practice, immanent critique means not appealing to an external moral law—not saying "according to utilitarian ethics, the suffering you cause to animals is wrong"—but rather taking the internal logic of the dominant culture's own stated values and demonstrating their inconsistency with the treatment of animals. Most people in industrial societies genuinely believe that

unnecessary suffering is bad. Most believe that the capacity to feel pain is morally relevant.

Most are opposed, at least in principle, to cruelty. A significant portion keep companion animals and relate to those animals with recognizable affection and care. The immanent critique of animal agriculture proceeds by taking these widely shared values seriously and showing that the institutional practices of the food system are radically inconsistent with them.

This is the form of argument that tends to be most effective precisely because it is immanent—it begins from inside the interlocutor's own stated commitments rather than importing a foreign moral framework. But the critical self-theorist holds this form of argument instrumentally, not as a revelation of moral truth. The point of immanent critique is not to prove that a universal moral principle has been violated. The point is to expose the internal contradictions within a system of reification—to make visible the gap between what the system claims about itself (it cares about animal welfare; it has eliminated unnecessary suffering; it is humane) and what it actually does.

HETERONOMOUS CRITICAL THEORY AND THE RECUPERATION OF VEGAN RADICALISM

The history of the animal liberation movement is, in part, a history of recuperation. The radical potential of the recognition that animals are autonomous beings capable of suffering and deserving of consideration has been repeatedly channeled into ideological formations that substitute new forms of submission for genuine autonomy.

Heteronomous critical theory, in McQuinn's definition, is critical theory in the service of heteronomous autonomy—critique dressed in autonomous clothes that in practice demands submission to a new form of heteronomy. The defining difference between genuinely critical self-theory and everything else that has gone by the name of critical theory is the unyieldingly persistent assertion of actually-lived autonomy and refusal of submission to any form of heteronomy.

The utilitarian animal liberation position, at its worst, demands that individuals submit their moral lives to the calculus of aggregate suffering—a calculation that can and has been used to justify an extraordinary range of conclusions, including ones that are deeply troubling from an anarchist perspective. The rights-based position demands submission to a deontological framework in which "animal rights" function as reified abstractions that generate binding obligations regardless of anyone's actual perspective or lived experience.

More recently, the corporate vegan movement—mainstream veganism as it has developed in the early twenty-first century, with its celebrity endorsements, its Beyond Burgers, its Oatly advertisements, its TED talks—represents a particularly complete recuperation of whatever radical critical potential veganism once had. Here, the refusal of animal exploitation has been absorbed into commodity consumption and brand identity. The vegan who buys oat milk from a corporation that has been acquired by a private equity firm, who wears Veja trainers because they are certified ethical, who follows vegan influencers on social media; this person is practicing a form of veganism that has been thoroughly domesticated by the very institutions it purports to oppose. The critical content has been evacuated. The recognitions that might have grounded a genuine refusal of the reifications sustaining the food system have been redirected into new patterns of commodity consumption, new institutional identities, new markets. This is recuperation in the most precise sense: the radical gesture is absorbed by the system and returned to the individual as a product.

All critical theory that is not consistently critical self-theory consists in critiques of particular forms of enslavement merely in order to substitute other forms of enslavement rather than to abolish all enslavement. Mainstream veganism, in its corporate and ideological forms, exemplifies this exactly: it critiques the enslavement of animals by factory farms while reinstating the enslavement of individuals to new ideological and commodity formations.